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ABSTRACT

In order to determine the content of an organizational communication course, this study examined 26 textbooks in that field, according to the frequency of discussion of a topic and the number of pages devoted to a topic. The findings from that examination indicate that topics in organizational communicaton can be outlined under three course types: communication skills necessary for successful careers in organizations; theories and methods of organizational communication necessary for advanced study in the area; and analysis and solution of the dominant problems faced by various types of organizations. Suggested topical outlines for each course type are provided. (RL)

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The Content of Organizational Communication

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The Content of Organizational Communication Texts

Interest in the area of organizational communication has been growing steadily for more than two decades. This interest has prompted the development of numerous courses, majors, and academic programs in organizational communication. For the professor assigned to teach the area this presents a problem. Specifically, "What should be the content of a course in organizational communication?"

The Problem

The problem of content in organizational communication courses flows from the problem of defining organizational communication. There is no "obvious" or "logical" definition of the area. Organizational communication can be and is taken to mean, "Communication in the Organization," or "Communication by the Organization," or "Communication as Management," or "Communication as Organization." Moreover, since interest in the area is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is no tradition of common usage, common concern, or common focus from which a definition might emerge. As Goldhaber (1974) observed, there are a great many definitions of organizational communication, but little agreement among the definitions. Since there is no commonly accepted definition of the subject, it is very difficult to develop commonly accepted content for the subject. Redding (1967) summarized the problem:

> We face here an interesting antinomy: on the one hand, there patently exists a widespread and lively interest in "Organizational Communication" (among both academes and businessmen); but on the other hand, and just as patently, there exists no consensus whatever on the precise nature of the thing we are interested in (p. 1).

Redding (1967) also suggested a way to go about solving this problem, "My conclusion: the 'field' of 'organizational communication' consists of whatever those who concern themselves with it say it is (p. 2)!" Thus, determining the content of organizational communication should be a matter of determining what those who are concerned with it are doing with it.

A number of authors have attempted to do just that. Cooper (1953), Knapp (1969), Blagdon and Spataro (1973), and Rogers (1975) have developed outlines of organizational communication to guide instructors. Voos (1967), Carter (1972), and Greenbaum, Falcione, et. al. (1975, 1976) have developed bibliographies to describe what is being written about organizational communication. Wright and Sherman (1970), Downs and Larimer (1974), Hatch, et. al. (1973), and Lewis (1975) have surveyed teachers to determine what is being taught as organizational communication. The common thread of these efforts has been the demonstration of an overwhelming lack of professional consensus on the nature of organizational communication.

Downs and Larimer (1975) attributed this lack of consensus to the relative youth of the area. They expected to variance to diminish as more texts became available and the subject crystallized. More texts have become available. In

fact, of the organizational communication texts available in April of 1977, more than 80% (twenty texts) were published in the last five years, 60% (fifteen texts) in the last two years. The purpose of this study was to examine the available texts to determine to what extent the subject has crystallized. The implicit assumption was that the nature of organizational communication is and the content of a course in organizational communication should be what the authors of textbook on organizational communication say it is and/or should be.

The Method

The methodology used to examine the texts was derived from Ross and Murdick (1977). They argued that a course could be organized around the consensus of topics considered most important by the authors of the texts on the subject. Two measures of importance were used: frequency of discussions of a topic (a discussion had to be at least two pages to be counted) and number of pages devoted to a topic. Moreover, the nature of the subject could be inferred from the number of authors adopting a particular perspective for treating the subject. A subjective count measured perspective.

Twenty six text and tradebooks were surveyed (a list of titles is available from the author). Handbooks, bibliographies, and readers were not included. Nor were texts on specific topics such as openness, speaking, writing, reporting, interviewing, advertising, public relations, etc. included.

The Results

The results of the survey of text content are shown in Table 1. Topics are listed first, followed by the number of books with separate discussions of the topic, and the number of pages devoted to the topic. Of special interest is the observation that no topic is covered in every text and the majority of topics are covered in less than half the texts.

Table 1.

Contents of Organizational Communication Texts

Topic	Discussion	Pages
Communication Theory	16	522
Organizational Communication	16	384
Interviewing	11	354
Organization Theory	10	235
Communication Management	9	274
Small Group Communication	9	273
Conference Techniques	9	205
Listening	9	134
Communication Channels	8	343
Media Selection	7	209
Presentations	7	177
Research Methods	7	139
Communication Climate	6	206
Communication Networks	6	171
Nonverbal Communication	6	124
Report Writing	5	279
Barriers to Communication	5	247
Organizational Structure	5	205
Writing Principles	5	203
Organizational Change	5	170
Persuasive Communication	5	154
Informative Communication	5	135
Motivation	5	133
Leadership	5	87
Management Theory	5	82
Letter Writing	4	240
Decision Making	4	141
Conflict	4	133
Interpersonal Communication	4	101
Language	4	100
Perception	4	77
Information Capacity	4	72
Training	3	83
Communication Satisfaction	3	30
Publications	2	130
Intrapersonal Communication	2	65
Personality	1	45
Mass Communication	1	43
Consulting	1	20

The results of the perspectives count is shown in Table 2. The perspectives are listed first, followed by the number of looks using that perspective. Of special interest here is the observation that no texts were written from the Communication by Organizations perspective (probably because advertising and public relations books were not surveyed).

Table 2.

Perspectives on Organizational Communication

Perspective		Books
Communication in Organizations		18
Interpersonal Cino	8	
Written Cino	2	
General Cino	8	
Communication by Organizations		0
Communication as Management		6
Communication as Organization		2

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the subject matter of Organizational Communication is crystallizing. Specifically, most of the authors (69%) view Organizational Communication as meaning Communication in Organizations. But, there still appears to be little consensus about the topics which should be contained in a course on Organizational Communication. Rather the analysis of texts suggested at least three different types of Organizational Communication course. The first type of course would teach students useful communication skills which would be instrumental to their successful careers in organizations. Two topic outlines of such a course are suggested below:

Outline A

1. Importance of Communication
2. Barriers to Communication → LISTENING
3. Choice: ~~Listening~~ or NonVerbal Communication
4. Interviewing
5. Choice: Conference Techniques or Small Group Communication
6. Presentations
7. Applications to (choice) training/sales/public relations/etc.

Outline B

1. Importance of Communication
2. Barriers to Communication
3. Writing Principles
4. Letters
5. Reports
6. Applications to (choice) job search/employee publications/ advertising/etc.

The second type of course would teach students theories and methods of organizational communication which would prepare them for advanced study in the area. This is practical in light of the findings of the Wright and Sherman (1970), Downs and Larimer (1973), and Hatch, et. al. (1973) studies. A topic outline for such a course is suggested below:

Outline C

1. Organizational Theories
   - Administrative Theory
   - Scientific Management
   - Human Relations
   - Contingency Theory
   - Modern Organization (Systems) Theory
2. Communication Theories
   - Information Theory
   - Persuasion Theory
   - Cybernetic Theory
   - Interpersonal Communication
   - Mass Communication
3. Organizational Communication
   - Information Processing
   - Communication Networks
   - Communication Climate
   - Technology
4. Research Methods
   - Observational Methods
   - Surveys (Interview & Questionnaire)
   - Network Analysis
   - Model Building

The third type of course would teach students to analyze and solve the dominant problem issues facing various types of organizations. This would be a communication careers preparation course. A topic outline for such a course is suggested below:

Outline D

1. Dominant issues (such as)
   - Innovation
   - Decision Making
   - Governance (Leadership & Participation)
   - Motivation
   - Conflict
   - Stability
   - Satisfaction
   - Productivity
   - Control
2. Analysis of Issues
   - Stock issues (from Argumentation Theory)
   - Scientific Analysis
   - Systems Analysis
3. Problem Solving
   - Training and Development
   - Process Consultation
   - Organization Design
   - Group Discussion

Texts are currently available which cover the materials in Outlines A and B. To a lesser extent there are texts to fit outline C. But none of the texts examined would fit Outline D. Primarily because authors writing in a dominant issues mode tend to focus on one or two issues (innovation in one book, conflict in another, control in another, etc.).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to attempt to answer the question, "What should be the content of a course in Organizational Communication?" The method involved examining twenty six currently available texts for consensus on (1) the nature of Organizational Communication, and (2) topics relevant to a course on Organizational Communication. On the basis of this analysis three types of course outlines were suggested.

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